



Chapter 39: Anchor Protocol

When they got back to Ace, the quiet room felt even smaller.

Not because the walls had moved.

Because Ace had.

She sat on the edge of the cot, foil blanket around her shoulders, interference band warm under her collarbones, eyes fixed on the closed camera shutter like she was daring it to open.

Mai took one step inside and stopped.

Something in Ace's posture made Mai's expression change—micro-shift from “angry” to “ready.”

Bright hovered in the doorway, tired but alert.

Clipboard stood behind them, watching like she was reading a live waveform.

Mai spoke first, soft but sharp. "Ace."

Ace blinked once, slowly, and looked at Mai.

"Anchor check," Mai said.

Ace's voice came out a little hoarse. "Here."

Mai nodded and stepped closer, careful, like you approach a skittish animal without insulting it.

"What happened," Mai asked, raw-fact tone.

Ace swallowed. "The tug got quieter with the band and patch."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "And."

Ace hesitated. "Violet is...watching."

Bright stiffened. Clipboard's pen scratched immediately.

Mai didn't flinch. "Watching how."

Ace stared at her own hands. "Like she's memorizing the interference. Like she's figuring out where the noise is weakest."

Mai's jaw clenched. "So she's adapting."

Ace nodded.

Clipboard spoke calmly from the doorway. "Ace. Any attempt to bargain. Any attempt to offer relief."

Ace's mouth tightened. "No explicit bargain. Just...suggestions. 'Easier if I stop fighting.'"

Clipboard nodded once. "Good. That matters."

Mai's hand hovered near Ace's wrist, not grabbing yet—asking with body language.

Ace lifted her hand slightly.

Mai took it.

Warm, firm, human contact.

The moment their hands connected, Ace's shoulders dropped a fraction, like her nervous system believed in physics more than hope.

Bright exhaled a breath that sounded suspiciously like relief.

Clipboard tilted her head. "Agent Mai, you're anchoring by proximity and tactile feedback."

Mai didn't look up. "Yes."

Clipboard's voice stayed calm. "We're formalizing it."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "You're turning me into a protocol."

Clipboard met her gaze. "You already are one. I'm just putting it in writing so nobody can override it with 'operational convenience.'"

Mai's mouth twitched. "Paper teeth."

Clipboard nodded. "Paper teeth."

Bright muttered, "This is going to end up with a three-letter acronym that ruins everyone's weekend."

Clipboard didn't smile, but her eyes flicked in a way that suggested correct.

She opened the clipboard and read from a page she'd clearly just written in the corridor.

"Anchor Protocol," she said, voice even. "Draft. Immediate implementation. Subject—Ace—maintains continuous human anchor contact during all transport and all exposure-risk phases. Anchor is Agent Mai by default. Secondary anchor is Dr. Bright if Agent Mai is incapacitated. No memetics relays. No speaker systems. No environmental addressing devices within twenty meters."

Mai's eyes sharpened. "Twenty."

Clipboard nodded. "Twenty."

Ace swallowed. "I'm not contagious."

Clipboard looked at her. Not unkind. "You're not. But your coupling signature is. The node doesn't need your permission to use a clean channel if we hand it one."

Mai squeezed Ace's hand once, hard. "We don't."

Ace nodded.

Clipboard continued. "Breathing disruption is effective. Confirmed. 'Wrong breath' maintained during hook attempts."

Ace blinked. "That's official."

Bright's mouth twisted. "Congratulations, you just got weaponized breathing."

Mai snorted softly. "I always knew you were good at suffocation, Ace."

Ace shot her a look—half horrified, half amused. "Mai!"

Mai's expression didn't soften, but her eyes did. "It's a compliment."

Clipboard—miraculously—didn't react to the flirting tone. She simply wrote another note.

"Humor and emotional grounding appear to reduce compliance drift," Clipboard said, as if reading a weather chart.

Bright choked a laugh. "Oh my God, she's logging jokes as countermeasures."

Mai's lips curved slightly. "Good. Put in that sarcasm is mandatory."

Clipboard didn't blink. "Noted."

Ace let out a breath that was almost a laugh, then stopped as her sternum twitched—faint tug, like the tag noticed levity and tested the seam.

Mai's hand tightened instantly. "No handshake."

Ace's breath went ragged on purpose. "No handshake."

The tug loosened.

Clipboard watched that tiny change and nodded once, satisfied. "Good. You can fight it without violence. We keep it that way."

Bright leaned against the doorframe. "So what's next. Transport?"

Clipboard nodded. "This craft takes you to a secure shore facility. No public port. No radio. Hardline only."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "And the platform."

Clipboard's gaze turned colder. "A team is already en route. By the time sunrise hits, all memetics relay access is frozen, all sedation logs are being copied, and the interface handler will either be identified or she will disappear—which is also an identification."

Bright muttered, "You people are terrifying."

Clipboard's voice was flat. "Yes."

Mai asked the question that mattered to her more than audits.

"What about the responder," Mai said.

Clipboard paused—honest pause.

"We cannot guarantee it won't continue searching," she said. "But we can guarantee we will stop giving it clean seams. We will keep Ace behind dampeners, noise, and human anchor contact."

Mai's eyes stayed hard. "And if it comes anyway."

Clipboard's gaze didn't shift. "Then we will learn what it is by how it tries."

Ace swallowed. "So I'm bait."

Mai's voice snapped. "No."

Clipboard stepped closer, just one pace. "Ace. You are not bait. You are a sensor. And you are protected."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "That's still using her."

Clipboard didn't deny it. "It is living in reality. The coupling exists. We can either pretend it doesn't and get surprised... or acknowledge it and build containment around it."

Mai's jaw clenched.

Ace squeezed Mai's hand gently, a small reversal—Ace anchoring Mai for a change.

"It's okay," Ace said quietly. "Not because I like it. Because I'd rather we see what's coming than wait for it to bite us in the dark."

Mai stared at her, eyes fierce.

Then Mai nodded once, slow. "Fine. But you do not do this alone."

Ace's throat tightened. "I won't."

Bright's gaze flicked between them, something softer passing through exhaustion. "That's the whole point, isn't it."

Clipboard closed her clipboard with a neat snap.

"Prepare for transport," she said.

Mai didn't move yet. She shifted closer, standing between Ace and the camera shutter as if the shutter could hurt her by opening.

Ace looked up at Mai.

Mai leaned down, voice so low it was almost a private frequency.

"If you feel it pulling," Mai murmured, "you tell me before you try to be brave."

Ace swallowed. "Okay."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "No heroic solo missions inside your ribs."

Ace's lips twitched. "Deal."

Bright cleared his throat. "I hate to interrupt whatever vow ceremony this is, but we should move before someone upstream decides to override Internal Audit with 'operational needs.'"

Clipboard's eyes flicked to him. "They won't."

Bright raised an eyebrow. "You sure."

Clipboard's voice was calm. "I froze their ability to unfreeze it."

Mai snorted. "Paper teeth."

Clipboard nodded. "Paper teeth."

Ace stood carefully, foil blanket sliding off her shoulders. The dampening patch and interference band stayed in place, cool and warm at once—tech and time.

Mai kept hold of her hand.

Bright led.

Clipboard opened the door.

And as they stepped back into the corridor, Ace felt the faint tag-line in her sternum twitch one more time—like something far away had noticed movement.

Mai squeezed her hand.

Ace breathed wrong on purpose.

And the tug eased again, frustrated.

They moved down the corridor as a unit—not a subject, not a project, not a compatibility test.

A small, stubborn cluster of humans refusing to become a clean signal.

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